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**Images of Foreign Countries on Chinese
Social Media:
A Comparative Study of State Accounts
and Private Accounts on the WeChat
Official Account Platform**

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Acknowledgement

Between March 1998 and August 1999, the then Russian President Boris Yeltsin sacked five prime ministers. China Central Television drew an analogy between the frequent reshuffles in Russia and the running-horse lantern, an ancient toy in China on the surface of which pictures of horses turn around one by one. Through watching the drama-like news stories on TV, I, a teenager living in a small town in Southwest China, became fascinated by remote countries for the first time. With a desire to learn more about the outside world, I decided to study international relations at university and worked as a foreign news reporter after graduation.

Shanghai Morning Post (SMP), my first employer, was a market-oriented newspaper affiliated with *Jiefang Daily* (or *Liberation Daily*), the official newspaper of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Shanghai Municipal Committee. As the most profitable newspaper in Shanghai, the SMP often sent journalists abroad to cover important international events in the 2000s. An often-cited example is that it was the first Chinese paper media to publish on-the-ground reporting on Somalian pirates from the chaotic country. Despite limitations, Chinese market-oriented media like the SMP, which partly or completely relied on subscriptions and advertisement rather than government allocation, provided numerous diversified and readable news stories about foreign countries to their readers for quite a long time. As in many other countries, however, the decline of legacy media and the rise of social media dominated the Chinese media landscape in the 2010s. Sadly, I came to feel that such changes in the media sector had not boosted foreign reporting in China, but had in fact led to less foreign coverage and more stereotypes about foreign countries on the Internet.

Was my intuition correct? With this question in mind, I applied for the fellowship at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ). I would like to first express my gratitude to the Thomson Reuters Foundation for sponsoring my research project. Next, I want to give my deepest gratitude to the RISJ for offering such a world-class programme that profoundly deepened my understanding of world journalism. In particular, I would like to thank Meera Selva, Director of the Journalism Fellowship Programme, for her constructive advice on my research and her encouragement, as well as patience, in waiting for my delayed paper. The research would have been impossible without the instruction of my advisor Dr. Antonis Kalogeropoulos, who taught me coding skills in detail. I owe him a great debt of gratitude. Duncan Hewitt, a former Thomson Reuters journalist fellow, did a thorough proofreading for my paper in a limited time. I could not express in words how grateful I am for his timely and professional help. I would also like to thank Philippa Garson, Events and Fellowship Officer at the RISJ, for her heart-warming support throughout my fellowship at Oxford.

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Last but not least, I would like to give my eternal gratitude to my parents, Lin Zhong and Shaorong Deng, and my husband Jiajun Yue for their altruistic support for my work and life in Oxford. It was challenging to do research while raising a toddler in an unfamiliar country. Yet their company made my life in Oxford full of love and joy. I could never repay their sacrifices for me. At least, I hope they will be proud of my work.

Introduction

The Internet and globalisation have made the world flatter, but most people in the world still rely primarily on media coverage to learn about foreign countries. In China, foreign news coverage probably has a bigger role. Official statistics show that, as of 2017, less than 180 million Chinese citizens had acquired passports¹, accounting for slightly above one tenth of the total population. Without direct exposure, the majority of Chinese people get to know remote countries and continents from news stories.

Like many other fields in China, information about foreign countries was once strictly controlled by the government. Almost all foreign news stories in the Chinese press were derived from the official Xinhua News Agency until the mid 1990s.² *Reference News*, a newspaper affiliated to the Xinhua News Agency, and previously available only to government officials, was the first and for a long time the only newspaper focusing on foreign news.

As a result of marketization in the 1990s, many Chinese media outlets attempted to provide more varied and readable foreign news stories. Several central-level official media outlets set up affiliated newspapers, magazines and programmes which sent journalists abroad to cover foreign news. Among the most popular was *Global Times*, a Chinese-language tabloid newspaper under the *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, which was established in 1993. And despite not having overseas bureaus, a large number of regional media, many of which were state-controlled yet market-oriented, enriched their foreign coverage by hiring freelancers to translate news stories from foreign media and inviting experts to write commentaries on particular events in foreign countries.³ In their heyday, wealthy regional media sent special correspondents to various corners of the planet to cover major events ranging from US presidential elections to the Iraqi War to the Japanese tsunami. The stories they filed back to China provided alternative perspectives to those of the central-level official media, and significantly broadened Chinese audiences' knowledge of foreign countries and international relations.

In the 2010s, the landscape of foreign news reporting in China was changed again by the rise of mobile Internet. Social media platforms replaced legacy media as the main channels for ordinary

¹ http://www.xinhuanet.com/local/2018-05/21/c_1122860633.htm

² KX Zhuang, "Developing subscribers of Xinhua and innovations", *Proceedings of Xinhua Annual Journalism Symposium 1998*, Beijing, Xinhua, pp. 146–153

³ Ming Dai, "Does the Medium Make a Difference? A Comparative Analysis of International News in Chinese Online and Print Newspapers", *China Media Research*, 2014, pp. 35-47

Chinese to acquire news and information. This led to two major changes in foreign news coverage. On the one hand, traditional outlets, which increasingly faced financial pressure, had to shrink the scale of their foreign news reporting teams. Some regional newspapers even chopped their entire international news departments. On the other hand, a surging number of *Zimeiti* (literally self-media), which refers to social media accounts run by individuals, offered foreign-related news stories that were diverged from those written by old-school foreign correspondents in many ways.

Some scholars believe that social media platforms have empowered savvy Chinese netizens to redefine and, in some cases, overtly challenge the official ideology.⁴ Yet some others are worried that the self-media, which do not have the capacity to conduct original news reporting, cannot make up the gap left by the decline of market-oriented legacy media, and rely more heavily on primary contents on state mouthpieces.

To study whether and to what extent social media has diversified and challenged the pattern of foreign news coverage in state media, this paper conducts a quantitative analysis of foreign-related stories published by state-owned accounts and private outlets on the WeChat Official Account Platform (WCOAP), the most prominent space for news consumption and sharing on Chinese social media.

The Rise of WeChat Official Accounts (WCOAs)

“Even the tiniest individuals have their own brands.” This is the Chinese-language slogan that WeChat, an all-in-one App with above 1 billion active daily users⁵, has trumpeted for the WCOAP since its launch in August 2012. As the slogan says, any individual or organisation is encouraged to register an “official account” and publish articles on the platform. Unlike Weibo, a twitter-equivalent social media in China, that restricts content to within 140 characters, the WCOAP allows authors to post articles without limitation on length. In addition, the WCOAP enables articles to have multi-media formats including texts, pictures, voice, video, and polls.

WCOA articles can reach WeChat users in two ways. First, if users subscribe to certain WCOAs, they will find all updates of these WCOAs in a built-in portal named “Subscription” on WeChat. Second, users will be exposed to WCOA articles in their WeChat messages, WeChat group chats, and WeChat

⁴ Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2009

⁵ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/255778/number-of-active-wechat-messenger-accounts/>

Moments (an online social space open to users' WeChat friends only), when someone forwards WCOA articles to these spaces.

Thanks to the huge user base of WeChat and its innovative content production and sharing process, all kinds of content producers have flocked to the WCOAP and turned it into the top "online news market" in China. It is worth noting that WCOAs include both media-run accounts and those run by non-media authors. Media-run WCOAs are accounts run by legacy media, including state media, independent media⁶, and foreign media. For instance, *The Economist* runs a WCOA, mainly to promote its Chinese-language App "Global Business Review".

When it comes to non-media WCOAs, we can roughly divide them into three categories: government accounts, private organization accounts, and self-media accounts. To directly reach the public, many government and party units have set up WCOAs. Among the biggest government WCOAs in terms of the number of subscribers are "Communist Party Member", which belongs to the CPC Organization Department, and "Shanghai City", which is run by the Information Office of the Shanghai Municipal People's Government. As for private organization accounts, they usually refer to WCOAs run by enterprises, NGOs, and other kinds of institutions. For example, IKEA posts WCOA articles every working day and is estimated to have more than 1 million subscribers. Last but not least, the WCOAP has incubated numerous self-media accounts, which can be viewed as micro blogs written by individuals. According to an estimate by iiMedia Research, a media consultancy, 2.6 million people worked for self-media accounts in 2017.⁷

It is necessary, however, to point out that boundaries among different types of WCOAs are sometimes blurred. In particular, a number of individuals have established media startups after finding initial success as writers of self-media. Among the most successful self-medias is Becky Fang, a former-journalist-turned fashion blogger, who registered a WCOA named "Miss Fantasy" in 2014 and has turned it into a media firm with its own fashion brand.

Given the blurred boundaries, this research does not differentiate media-run accounts from non-media-run accounts. Rather, it divides WCOAs into state accounts and private accounts in terms of ownership, and conducts a comparative analysis of content about foreign countries posted by these two types of accounts. The ownership matters to the study because, whether or not they are run by

⁶ Independent media here refers to media outlets that do not receive any financial support from the government.

⁷ <https://www.iimedia.cn/c400/50347.html>

media, state accounts are more in line with official ideology, while private accounts have greater flexibility.

Literature Review

Media Attention to Foreign News

Given its important role in shaping the world view of the public, foreign news coverage has been an enduring topic in communication research. A well-documented trend is that there has been a decline of media attention devoted to foreign news since the end of the Cold War.

There has been much research on US media in relation to this topic. According to one estimate, US newspaper editors and television news executives have reduced the space and airtime devoted to foreign coverage by 70 percent to 80 percent since the 1980s.⁸ Claude Moisy suggests that the share of foreign stories on US television networks, in terms of the number of stories, declined from 35 percent in the 1970s to 23 percent in 1995. In terms of the time devoted to foreign news, the share was down from 45 percent in the 1970s to 13.5 percent in 1995.⁹

In the UK, researchers found that there were nearly 40 percent fewer international stories across four national newspapers, *The Guardian*, *the Daily Telegraph*, *the Daily Mail*, and *the Daily Mirror*, in 2009 compared to 1979. The percentage of international news dropped over the same time period from 20 percent to just 11 percent.¹⁰

There are few studies showing a broader picture of the global trend in attention to foreign news coverage. Yet two cross-country research papers show that foreign coverage represented a minority of news content among national broadcasters in many countries in the 2000s and the 2010s. Jurgen Wilke, Christine Heimprecht, and Akiba Cohen find that the average share of foreign news on television in 17 countries and regions across four continents was 33 percent in 2008. Out of 17 countries and regions analysed, the share of foreign news in 9 countries and regions was below the average level. In Japan and Italy, the proportion of foreign news on television was slightly above one

⁸ David Shaw, "Foreign News Shrinks in Era of Globalization", *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 2001

⁹ Claude Moisy, "Foreign News Flow in the Information Age", Discussion Paper D-23, The Joan Shorenstein Centre, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA., 1996

¹⁰ Martine Moore, "Shrinking World: The Decline of International Reporting in the British Press", Media Standards Trust, 2010

fifth.¹¹ Another study, on TV news in 2010, demonstrated that, out of 11 countries analysed, percentages of foreign news in 9 countries were below 33 percent. In particular, foreign news accounted for less than one seventh of the news output of broadcasters in the US (14 percent), India (13 percent), and Australia (12 percent).¹²

China is among the 17 countries analysed by Wilke, Heimprecht, and Cohen. Their research shows that the share of foreign news in Chinese broadcasters was 27 percent in 2008, which was the same as the proportion in the US.¹³ An earlier comparative study on Chinese and US national TV news found in 1992 that China Central Television (CCTV) tended to broadcast more domestic news (57 percent) than international news (42 percent).¹⁴ Although these two studies are not comparable in a strict sense, they can broadly demonstrate that attention to foreign news in the Chinese media declined between the 1990s and the 2000s.

Geographic Distribution of Foreign Coverage

The geographic imbalance of foreign coverage, which refers to the prominence of some countries and the invisibility of some others, is another central theme of the study of foreign news.

Many previous studies demonstrate that the US is the most prominent country in media reports in various countries. Wilke, Heimprecht, and Cohen's research shows that, in 10 out of 16 countries and regions analysed, the US was the most covered country on the TV news in 2008. In the other 6 countries, including China, the US was the second prominent country. After the US, European countries, such as the UK, France, Russia, and Germany, were also frequently mentioned in international news. Europe (40 percent) as a region surpassed North America (23 percent) as the most covered area. In sharp contrast, countries in sub-Saharan Africa were not represented at all in foreign coverage in the sample period in 2008.¹⁵

¹¹ Jurgen Wilke, Christine Heimprecht, and Akiba Cohen, "The Geography of Foreign News on Television: A Comparative Study of 17 Countries", *The International Communication Gazette* 74 (4), 2012, pp. 302-322

¹² Toril Aalberg, Stylianos Papathanassopoulos, Stuart Soroka, James Curran, Kaori Hayashi, Shanto Lyengar, Paul K. Jones, Gianpietro Mazzoleni, Hernando Rojas, David Rowe, and Rodney Tiffen, "International TV News, Foreign Affairs Interest and Public Knowledge: A Comparative Study of Foreign News Coverage and Public Opinion in 11 Countries", *Journalism Studies*, 2013, Vol. 14, No. 3, pp. 387-406

¹³ Jurgen Wilke, Christine Heimprecht, and Akiba Cohen, "The Geography of Foreign News on Television: A Comparative Study of 17 Countries", *The International Communication Gazette* 74 (4), 2012, pp. 302-322

¹⁴ Tsan-Kuo Chang, Jian Wang, and Chih-Hsien Chen, "The Social Construction of International Imagery in the Post-Cold War Era: A Comparative Analysis of U.S. and Chinese National TV News", *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 42 (3), 1998, pp. 277-296

¹⁵ Jurgen Wilke, Christine Heimprecht, and Akiba Cohen, "The Geography of Foreign News on Television: A Comparative Study of 17 Countries", *The International Communication Gazette* 74 (4), 2012, pp. 302-322

What makes some countries more prominent in foreign news than others? Today it is widely accepted that the prominence of a foreign country in the news is attributed to three groups of variables: (a) national traits (e.g. the size and power of the foreign country); (b) relatedness (namely, proximity to that foreign country in terms of geography, demography, etc.); and (c) events (e.g. disasters, wars, conflict, local protest).¹⁶ By studying international news sections of newspapers in 38 countries, H. Denise Wu finds that trade volume with the reporting country and the number of international news agencies stationed in the country are the strongest predictors of countries' news prominence.¹⁷

When it comes to Chinese media, scholars find that the US has constantly received the most attention as well. Ming Dai's comparative research on Chinese online and print newspapers shows the total percentage of mentions of the US was 22.7 percent, followed by Japan (9.3 percent), the UK (4.7 percent), and Russia (4.3 percent).¹⁸ Other scholars have found that the Chinese media pays more attention to European countries than to China's Asian neighbours. Among the 10 most covered countries in China in 2008, there were five European countries (39 percent) and only two Asian countries (13 percent) – Japan and South Korea.¹⁹ Scholars believe this imbalance originates in long-term and current political-economic reasons.

Notably, previous studies demonstrate that the high-level diplomatic visit is a unique determinant of foreign news in China. Tsan-Kuo Chang, Jian Wang, and Chih-Hsien Chen note that, from June 15 to July 15, 1992, Tunisia ranked the ninth prominent country on China's CCTV news, while the United States' ABC news, a comparable research subject in their paper, did not mention it at all during the same time period. Through examining the topics covered, the three scholars realise the prominence of Tunisia resulted from then Chinese President Yang Shangkun's state visit to the country.²⁰ Wilke, Heimprecht and Cohen's joint study in 2008 cited above reinforces the argument. Their research shows that in four separate weeks between January and April 2008, Algeria and Mauritania ranked the seventh and tenth most covered country respectively on China's TV news. These two countries

¹⁶ Elad Segev, "Visible and Invisible Countries: News Flow Theory Revised", *Journalism*, 2014, pp. 1-18

¹⁷ H. Denise Wu, "Systemic Determinants of International News Coverage: A Comparison of 38 Countries", *Journal of Communication*, Spring 2000

¹⁸ Ming Dai, "Does the Medium Make a Difference? A Comparative Analysis of International News in Chinese Online and Print Newspapers", *China Media Research*, 10 (2), 2014, pp. 35-47

¹⁹ Jurgen Wilke, Christine Heimprecht, and Akiba Cohen, "The Geography of Foreign News on Television: A Comparative Study of 17 Countries", *The International Communication Gazette* 74 (4), 2012, pp. 302-322

²⁰ Tsan-Kuo Chang, Jian Wang, and Chih-Hsien Chen, "The Social Construction of International Imagery in the Post-Cold War Era: A Comparative Analysis of U.S. and Chinese National TV News", *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 42 (3), 1998, pp. 277-296

did not appear in any top 10 rankings in the other 16 countries analysed. The researchers conclude that the prominence of Algeria as well as Mauritania in Chinese foreign news can be explained by the occurrence of diplomatic visits.²¹

Foreign News Framing

The framing of foreign news has long been a crucial area of research for studying the influence of media on public perceptions on foreign countries. Robert M. Entman suggests that frames provide a story's organising principle and theme through selection and salience: "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described."²² By using a specific frame in a news report, the journalist projects an event or an issue through a desired lens.

Susan Fiske and Shelley Taylor theorize that human beings are "cognitive misers" by nature, which means that they tend to do as little thinking as possible. They prefer to have a quick way of processing information easily. This is done by "frames" which help them understand the received messages. This makes frames a potent tool to influence the interpretation of messages by the receivers. The senders of the messages, who have control over the building of these frames, thus become all the more powerful.²³

In order to analyse the framing, many scholars focus on the tone of news about foreign countries. Through coding four major Chinese online and print newspapers' coverage of international news in 2012, Ming Dai finds that the overall tone of coverage of foreign countries in Chinese media was negative (43.8 percent), and that positive stories (18.8 percent) were the least prominent. Ming Dai's research also shows that online foreign news is more negative than reporting in newspapers.²⁴ Yunya Song and Tsan-Kuo Chang find, in a longitudinal research, that the proportion of negative tones in foreign policy news (which refers to news involving China and foreign countries) soared from 7.7

²¹ Jurgen Wilke, Christine Heimprecht, and Akiba Cohen, "The Geography of Foreign News on Television: A Comparative Study of 17 Countries", *The International Communication Gazette* 74 (4), 2012, pp. 302-322

²² Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm", *Journal of Communication*, 1993, pp. 51

²³ Susan Fiske and Shelley E. Taylor, *Social Cognition: From Brains to Culture*, SAGE Publications, 2013

²⁴ Ming Dai, "Does the Medium Make a Difference? A Comparative Analysis of International News in Chinese Online and Print Newspapers", *China Media Research*, 10 (2), 2014, pp. 35-47

percent in 1989 to 25.5 percent in 2009, while the share of positive tones dropped by 31 points to 36.2 percent in 2009.²⁵

The negative framing of foreign news has also been found in studies of the images of specific countries in Chinese media. Deqiang Ji, Zhengrong Hu, and Yousaf Muhammad's research on the image of India on three different types of online news media demonstrates that, for most of the period sampled, the theme of India-related stories was strongly negative. Interestingly, however, right before and after a three-day visit by President Xi Jinping to India, the negative image of India was removed. Instead, India was depicted as a strategic partner of China in international collaboration. Yet after the visit, the theme of India-related content returned to the negative side.²⁶

Why do Chinese mouthpieces tend to portray foreign countries negatively? By studying foreign news on *National Network News*, the most authoritative TV news programme in China, researchers concluded that Chinese state media juxtaposes negative foreign stories with inspiring domestic news to create a subtle comparison showing a stable and vibrant Chinese society.²⁷

Methodology

As mentioned above, I have conducted a comparative study of private accounts and state accounts on the WCOAP. To understand whether and how private accounts diverge from state accounts in foreign news, this paper will focus on four research questions.

RQ1: Do private accounts pay more, less, or equal attention to foreign countries than state accounts on the WCOAP?

RQ2: Do private accounts expand the diversity of information on foreign countries compared to state accounts in terms of countries covered?

RQ3: Do private accounts have different determinants for foreign coverage?

²⁵ Yunya Song and Tsan-Kuo Chang, "The News and Local Production of the Global: Regional Press Revisited in Post-WTO China", *The International Communication Gazette* 75 (7), 2013, pp. 619-635

²⁶ Deqiang Ji, Zhengrong Hu, and Yousaf Muhammad, "Neighbouring Competitor? Indian Image in Chinese Media", *Global Media and China* 2016, Vol. 1(3) 234-250

²⁷ Tsan-Kuo Chang, Jian Wang, and Chih-Hsien Chen, "The Social Construction of International Imagery in the Post-Cold War Era: A Comparative Analysis of U.S. and Chinese National TV News", *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 42 (3), 1998, pp. 277-296

RQ4: Do private accounts develop foreign coverage frames that are different from those of state accounts?

Previous studies of foreign news coverage usually select news samples from only a couple of representative media outlets. This paper finds that the traditional sampling method is not suitable for the current study, which focuses on WCOAs. First, as mentioned above, the WCOAP is a marketplace where the legacy media competes with various types of content producers, ranging from government organisations to commercial enterprises to individual opinion leaders. Consequently, the contents circulated on the platform are diverse. As well as news stories, the WCOAP is flooded with op-ed articles, film reviews, literary works, travel notes, official announcements, popular science articles, and so forth. Unlike traditional portals that divide content into different sections, the WCOAP encourages all kinds of content to compete with each other in a single Subscription portal. Given this special landscape, non-news content covering foreign countries can be influential to the world view of Chinese audiences as well. If we excluded non-news items that significantly mention foreign countries, this study would be unable to represent the overall picture of foreign coverage on the WCOAP.

For instance, *Ping's Talk Today*, a self-media, published an article entitled "Always Some Moments that Make Me Feel Proud of Being a Chinese: Short Stories Showcasing the Rise of a Great Power" on November 27, 2018.²⁸ Zhou Xiaoping, the owner of the account, compiled 36 readers' letters on this topic, in which readers shared their experiences overseas or their encounters with foreigners in China. More than 100,000 people read it and nearly 8,000 clicked the button "like" to show their endorsement. Foreign countries including Japan, South Korea, Thailand, the US, and Germany, were heavily discussed in the article. None of stories in the article fits the classic definition of foreign news reporting. Given the popularity of the article, however, it is reasonable to believe that it is at least equally influential as classic foreign coverage to Chinese audiences' understanding of foreign countries.

Second, due to publishing rules of the WCOAP, most private accounts can publish articles only once a day, while many state accounts are allowed to publish content multiple times within a day. For

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https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjM5MzU4ODk2MA==&mid=2735462763&idx=1&sn=3ea7b1b0cd3c306adaabbc7840bd9164&scene=0#wechat_redirect

instance, *People's Daily* posted 3,569 times in 2018.²⁹ In other words, the party newspaper posted news 9.8 times on average every day. For each pop-up, all accounts are allowed to publish eight articles at the maximum. As a result, selecting articles from only a couple of accounts would lead to a considerable imbalance between state accounts and private accounts in terms of the number of articles.

In order to examine the overall picture of foreign coverage on the WCOAP, this study samples content items from the 100 most popular WCOAs. The ranking comes from New Rank, which is a well-recognized new media data monitoring firm based in Shanghai and ranks WCOAs every day, every month, and every year. This study chooses a monthly ranking from October 2018, which shows the 100 most popular WCOAs from 1 October 2018 to 31 October 2018. It is worth noting that a rival ranking published by GSdata, another leading media monitoring firm in China, overlaps with 73 percent of the ranking released by New Rank.

As mentioned above, every WCOA is allowed to release up to eight articles for each pop-up. The first article of each pop-up is called the top story. WCOAs tend to put their best, usually original, content in their top stories. Not surprisingly, top stories are more likely to attract a bigger readership than other articles published at the same time. Given their importance and popularity, the first step of this study was to select 3,594 top stories published by the 100 most popular WCOAs between 15 November 2018 and 30 November 2018.

The reason why the study selected the second half of November is because there was not any big domestic event during this time period, for instance the National People's Congress, held every March. Thus, the study can limit the impact of domestic issues on foreign news coverage.

To pick out articles significant to the images of foreign countries, this study sampled top stories that mentioned at least one foreign country more than five times. A mention can be a full name of a foreign country, an abbreviation, or a name of a foreign region or city. Take the UK for example: I manually identified articles containing words like *ying guo* (the UK), *zhong ying guan xi* (Sino-UK relations), *ying jun* (British army), *niu jin* (Oxford), *su ge lan* (Scotland), etc. Regarding the format, the mentions can be in texts, pictures, videos, etc. Nevertheless, they must be in Chinese, since the study aims to examine how foreign countries are represented to Chinese-speaking readers.

²⁹ <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/54323437>

Of 3, 594 top stories, 139 items are news briefings that contain a number of short items. For news briefings, this study examines their first news items only, as these can be viewed as “top stories of top stories”. For instance, of 15 news briefings published by *New Fortune Fans*, a self-media, 13 briefings started with an op-ed section on the top international news on that day. These op-ed sections, usually around 800 words, look like complete articles and have a significant impact on the images of foreign countries.

Eventually, out of 3, 594 top stories, this study sampled 529 items that mentioned at least one foreign country six times or more. Among them, 379 items were published by state accounts, and 150 articles came from private accounts. All 529 articles were coded for the following variables: country mentioned, type of story, story topic, tone about foreign country, and tone about China.

Country mentioned. Since this study aims to examine how foreign countries are represented to Chinese readers, I deploy a country list recognised by the Chinese government. So far, the Chinese government has recognised 195 foreign countries, including countries that have no diplomatic relations with China. The list overlaps with that of the United Nations, with the exception of three countries: the Vatican, Cook Islands, and Niue. The Holy See, which is a non-member observer state of the United Nations, is not recognised by the Chinese government. Cook Islands and Niue are recognised by the Chinese government, but not on the list of the United Nations. The clarification is essential because both Cook Islands and Niue were intensively covered by WCOAs in the two weeks analysed.

Types of story. Chang, Wang, and Chen classify news into three types: domestic news, referring to stories about the home country’s activities that do not involve any foreign country; foreign/international news, dealing with stories about foreign countries; and foreign policy news involving the home country and at least one foreign country.³⁰ Based on their categories, this study coded all sample articles in terms of three types of story, which were: Chinese domestic news featuring intensive mentions of foreign countries; international news related to China; and foreign news with no connection to China.

³⁰ Tsan-Kuo Chang, Jian Wang, and Chih-Hsien Chen, “The Social Construction of International Imagery in the Post-Cold War Era: A Comparative Analysis of U.S. and Chinese National TV News”, *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 42 (3), 1998, pp. 277-296

Story topic. This study divided the 529 articles into twelve categories of topics. These were politics/diplomacy, economics/trade/business, military/defence, crime/violence, disaster/accident, entertainment/fashion, society, technology, health, education, culture, and sport.

Tone towards foreign countries. Each article was coded for its tone regarding the foreign countries covered. The three types of tone this study employed were positive, neutral, and negative. I coded the tone regarding a foreign country to be positive if I identified commendatory terms about that country or people from that country. For instance, *Gov.cn*, a WCOA run by the Central Government of China, praised Brunei and the Philippines as “friendly neighbouring countries” in an article about President Xi Jinping’s diplomatic visits. A negative tone refers to pejorative descriptions of a foreign country or people from the country. For example, *Zhan Hao*, a self-media account with the highest ranking among all private accounts, condemned Canada, France, and Germany for “shamelessly” intervening in China’s internal politics, after their ambassadors sent a joint letter to the leader of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, raising concerns about the situation in Xinjiang. A neutral tone means an article does not contain any emotional description of a foreign country.

Tone about China. Each article was coded for the tone of its references to China. Unlike the tone of reporting of foreign countries, this study divided the tone of coverage of China into five categories: 1) no mention; 2) neutral; 3) imperfect China; 4) China being targeted; and 5) amazing China. The tone “imperfect China” refers to narratives that admit China needs to improve in certain aspects. When it comes to foreign stories, articles with this tone usually imply that foreign countries are better than China and China should learn from them to catch up. The tone “China being targeted” emphasises the threat China is facing in the global arena, especially in the field of international politics. The concept of “Amazing China” is borrowed from a propagandist documentary with the same title in 2018, which displayed China's achievements in science, technology, industry, and poverty alleviation.

Results

Proportion of foreign news coverage

As shown in Table 1, out of 3, 594 top stories, 529 articles intensively mention foreign countries, accounting for 14.7 percent in all samples. Among them, 379 articles come from state accounts and 150 articles from private accounts. The proportion of stories significant for foreign countries in state accounts is 14.8 percent, which is slightly higher than 14.5 percent in private accounts. It is evident that, overall, both state accounts and private accounts have low interest in foreign countries.

To look more closely, this study categorizes sample articles into three types. Stories in the first type, in essence, are domestic news, despite mentions of foreign countries. Only stories in the second and the third types are foreign news coverage in the classic sense. If we exclude stories of the first type, the share of foreign news is even smaller, i.e. 13.5 percent in state accounts and 12.1 percent in private accounts. Comparing this with data from previous studies mentioned above, we see a striking decline of foreign news coverage in China when legacy media shifts to social media platforms. The even lower proportion of foreign news in private accounts seems to support previous scholars’ conclusions that a more market-oriented media system gives less attention to international and foreign news.³¹

Both state accounts and private accounts care most about international stories in which China is involved. The proportion of China-related international stories is 10.8 percent in state accounts and 6.5 percent in private accounts. But private accounts show a bigger interest in purely foreign stories, the topics of which are not relevant to China. The share of this type of news in private accounts is 5.6 percent, which more than double that in state accounts (2.7 percent).

Table 1: Proportion of Foreign News Coverage

Item	All accounts	All accounts (%)	State accounts	State accounts (%)	Private accounts	Private accounts (%)
Stories intensively mentioning foreign countries	529	14.7	379	14.8	150	14.5
<i>Domestic stories</i>	61	1.7	36	1.4	25	2.4
<i>China-related international stories</i>	343	9.5	275	10.8	67	6.5
<i>Foreign stories</i>	126	3.5	68	2.7	58	5.6
Total top stories	3594		2558		1036	

³¹ Toril Aalberg, Stylianos Papathanassopoulos, Stuart Soroka, James Curran, Kaori Hayashi, Shanto Lyengar, Paul K. Jones, Gianpietro Mazzoleni, Hernando Rojas, David Rowe, and Rodney Tiffen, “International TV News, Foreign Affairs Interest and Public Knowledge: A Comparative Study of Foreign News Coverage and Public Opinion in 11 Countries”, *Journalism Studies*, 2013, Vol. 14, No. 3, pp. 387-406

Interestingly, however, if we look at accounts that pay the biggest attention to foreign countries, eight out of ten accounts are private. As shown in Table 2, the account of *Reference News* and that of *Liaowang Institute*, a think tank, are the only two state-owned outlets among the ten most foreign concentrated accounts. It is worth noting that both of them are affiliated to Xinhua News Agency.

The top two accounts in terms of foreign concentration are both run by grassroots micro-bloggers, although their genuine grassroots identities might be questionable.³² Zhou Xiaoping, the author of *Ping's Talk Today*, is known for his patriotic essays. In 2014, he was praised by President Xi Jinping in person, at a high-level symposium on culture and arts, for his enthusiasm in spreading “positive energy.” On WeChat, Zhou frequently publishes commentary articles about current international affairs.

Table 2: Ten Most Foreign Concentrated WCOAs

Rank	Account	Percentage of foreign intensive stories (%)	Type of account
1	Ping's Talk Today (今日平说)	88	Private
2	New Fortune Fans (新财迷)	87	Private
3	Military Speaking Hall (讲武堂)	81	Private
4	Reference News (参考消息)	73	State
5	Zhan Hao (占豪)	67	Private
6	Crazy Warfare (军武次位面)	63	Private
7	Tiexue Military (铁血军事)	56	Private
8	Liaowang Institute (瞭望智库)	46	State
9	Sina Entertainment (新浪娱乐)	38	Private
9	Instagram Selections (Instagram 优选)	38	Private

³² Maria Repnikova and Kecheng Fang, “Authoritarian Participatory Persuasion 2.0: Netizens as Thought Work Collaborators in China”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2018

The second and the fifth account on the list are owned by the same blogger, whose pseudonym is Zhan Hao. It is unclear whether articles in these two accounts are written by the blogger individually or a group of writers led by the blogger. Nevertheless, both accounts have achieved huge success in terms of readership and the number of subscribers. In particular, *Zhan Hao* ranked the fourth most popular WCOA in 2016, and fifth in 2017. Its ranking fell to seventh in 2018, but it remained the most popular private WCOA. Similar to *Ping's Talk Today*, *Zhao Hao* and *New Fortune Fans* focus on hard news like international politics, economy, and military affairs, especially China-related events.

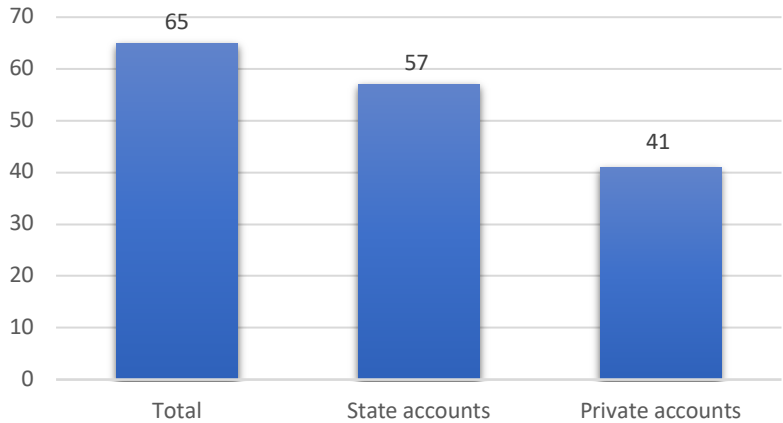
As shown by their names, *Military Speaking Hall*, *Crazy Warfare*, and *Tiexue Military* focus on military and defence news. Another similarity of these three accounts is their ownership. They are all run by large or medium companies rather than individual bloggers. For instance, *Military Speaking Hall* is operated by the military channel of Tencent.com, a news website owned by Tencent, the tech giant which is the parent company of WeChat. Besides current military news, these accounts also published plenty of articles about weaponry and historical wars.

At the bottom of the list are two accounts concentrating on soft news. *Sina Entertainment*, affiliated with Sina, another tech giant, devotes much attention to entertainment stars and other celebrities' gossips. Apart from entertainment, *Instagram Selections* publishes odds news from foreign societies and serious biographies of celebrities, like Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the associate justice of the US Supreme Court.

Countries mentioned

Overall, the 529 sample articles intensively mentioned 65 foreign countries across five continents. Covering 57 countries, the state-owned accounts show a bigger diversity in geography than the private accounts, which mentioned 41 foreign countries.

Chart 1: Number of Countries Intensively Mentioned



The US was the most covered country during the time period analysed, accounting for 29.9 percent. It is worth noting that the share of the US is higher than that of the following five countries combined. It demonstrates that WCOAs are following legacy media in adopting the US-dominated pattern of foreign coverage.

Because of the overwhelming proportion of coverage of the US, North America (30.6 percent) is the most covered continent, followed by Western Europe (16.5 percent) and East Asia (11.4 percent). As shown in Table 3, of the ten most covered countries on the WCOAP, five countries are in Europe. It supports the argument in previous studies that Chinese media pay more attention to Europe than to neighbouring Asian countries.

In order to measure the dispersion of foreign countries in coverage, Wilke, Heimprecht, and Cohen created a country concentration index (CCI), referring to the share of the 10 most covered countries.³³ In their study, Chinese televisions' CCI was 58 percent in 2008, which was the second lowest among 17 countries and regions analysed. This implies that the Chinese media covered wider geographic regions than its counterparts in other countries. This study finds that WCOAs, with a CCI of 69.3 percent, are more focused on a small group of foreign countries than legacy media eleven years ago. Nevertheless, WCOAs still demonstrate a balanced attention to different regions of the world. As shown in Table 4, all ten regions of the world are intensively mentioned by sample WCOAs, although Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for less than 1 percent.

³³ Jurgen Wilke, Christine Heimprecht, and Akiba Cohen, "The Geography of Foreign News on Television: A Comparative Study of 17 Countries", *The International Communication Gazette* 74 (4), 2012, pp. 302-322

Table 3: Ten Most Mentioned Countries in WCOAs

Country	Number of mentions	Share of mentions (%)
United States	223	29.9
Japan	54	7.2
Russia	38	5.1
Papua New Guinea	36	4.8
Spain	30	4.0
Philippines	30	4.0
India	30	4.0
United Kingdom	30	4.0
Italy	23	3.1
South Korea	23	3.1
Pakistan	20	2.7
Brunei	18	2.4
Argentina	17	2.3
France	15	2
Ukraine	14	1.9
CCI (10)	517	69.3
Total	746	100

In terms of regional distribution, private accounts do not provide more diversified coverage than state accounts. Table 4 shows that Sub-Saharan Africa is totally ignored by private accounts. The proportions of Oceania and Latin America & the Caribbean in private accounts are less than 1 percent. In addition, the CCI of private accounts (77.5 percent) is higher than that of state accounts (69.7 percent). Compared to state accounts (27.8 percent), private accounts (34.6 percent) are even more concentrated on the US.

Table 4: Regional Distribution of Countries Intensively Mentioned

Region	All accounts (%)	State accounts (%)	Private accounts (%)
North America	30.6	28.3	35.5
West Europe	16.5	16.3	16.9
East Asia	11.4	8.9	16.9
South-east Asia	9.8	10.9	7.4
Oceania	8.4	11.8	0.9
South Asia	8.2	8.7	6.9
East Europe	7.2	6.0	10.0
Latin America and the Caribbean	3.8	5.0	0.9
Central and West Asia	3.4	2.7	4.8
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.8	1.2	0

As shown in Table 5, the other countries most prominently shared by state accounts and private accounts are Japan, India, Russia, and the UK. They are either neighbouring countries of China, or great powers. This demonstrates that regionalism is still a major determinant of foreign coverage in WCOAs. However, the prominence of some other countries on the list, for example, Papua New Guinea, Brunei, and Ukraine, can hardly be explained by regionalism or the great power pattern. To figure out the determinant, it is necessary to examine the topics of the sample articles.

Table 5: Ten Most Mentioned Countries in WCOAs

Country	Number of mentions in state accounts	Share of mentions in state accounts (%)	Country	Number of mentions in private accounts	Share of mentions in private accounts (%)
United States	143	27.8	United States	80	34.6
Papua New Guinea	35	6.8	Japan	27	11.7
Spain	29	5.6	Russia	17	7.4
Japan	27	5.2	South Korea	10	4.3
Philippines	26	5.0	United Kingdom	10	4.3
India	22	4.3	India	8	3.5
Russia	21	4.1	Malaysia	8	3.5
United Kingdom	20	3.9	Germany	7	3.0

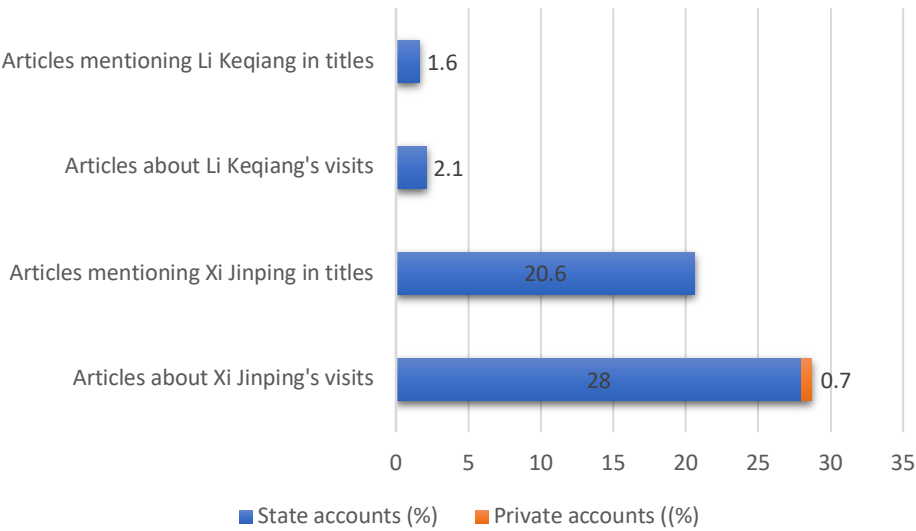
Brunei	18	3.5	Italy	6	2.6
Pakistan	18	3.5	Ukraine	6	2.6
CCI (10)	359	69.7	CCI (10)	179	77.5
Total	515		Total	231	

News Topics

Previous studies have shown that the diplomatic visit is a unique determinant of foreign news in Chinese media. This study finds that the pattern continues to be prominent in state accounts on the WCOAP. Of the ten most covered countries in state accounts, four countries were visited by President Xi Jinping during the time period analysed. Papua New Guinea (6.8 percent), where Xi Jinping stayed for the longest time, received the most attention on state accounts, followed by Spain (5.6 percent), the Philippines (5 percent), and Brunei (3.5 percent). In fact, Xi Jinping’s visit was the only reason why state accounts covered Spain and Brunei. All articles mentioning Spain and Brunei were about Xi Jinping’s visits to the two countries. Of all news mentioning Papua New Guinea, news about Xi Jinping’s visit accounted for 97.1 percent. The share for the Philippines was 88.5 percent.

To be more specific, foreign coverage in state accounts was heavily determined by Xi Jinping’s diplomatic visits, rather than by any other Chinese leaders’ events. Out of the 379 sample articles in state accounts, 78 items directly mentioned Xi Jinping’s name in their titles, accounting for 20.6 percent. There were a few articles that covered Xi Jinping’s visits yet did not mention his name in their titles. For example, *People’s Daily* posted a series of articles entitled “Here is Papua New Guinea”, “Here is Spain”, “Here is The Philippines”, and so on, as supporting coverage on Xi Jinping’s visits. If we include those articles, the proportion of articles related to Xi Jinping’s visits is as high as 28.2 percent. Notably, state accounts did not give much coverage to Premier Li Keqiang, who was visiting Singapore and attending the 21st ASEAN Plus Three Summit during the same period. Only 8 articles in state accounts paid attentions to Li Keqiang’s diplomatic events, accounting for 2.1 percent.

Chart 2: Diplomatic Visits Determined News



As Chart 2 shows, private accounts pay little attention to top leaders’ activities. The only article of this kind comes from *Guancha.cn*, a self-claimed independent media established in 2012. Nevertheless, it does not focus on Xi Jinping’s visit itself, but an anecdote that all Chinese officials who accompanied Xi Jinping to Spain were wearing Chinese tunic suits. In addition, private accounts did not cover Brunei at all and mentioned Papua New Guinea and Spain only once during the period analysed. The sharp contrast indicates that while state media copies the leader-driven pattern to social media, grassroots bloggers and private media firms have developed a more market-oriented pattern of foreign coverage.

As to other prominent countries in Table 5, stories about Malaysia, Ukraine, and Pakistan are heavily event-driven. Malaysia and Ukraine ranked 7th and 10th most covered country in private accounts respectively. More than 4/5 of articles mentioning Malaysia were discussing the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, which carried 153 Chinese nationals. All articles intensively mentioning Ukraine were covering the clash between Ukraine and Russia in Kerch Strait. State accounts did not cover Malaysia or Ukraine much. Instead, Pakistan ranked the 10th most covered country in state accounts. Of 18 stories in state accounts mentioning Pakistan, 15 articles were covering a terrorist attack against the Chinese Consulate in Karachi. The divergence suggests that private accounts care more about military issues while state accounts pay more attention to China-related crises.

A thorough review of news topics supports the argument. As shown in Table 6, the five most covered topics in state accounts were all related to China. Political stories involving China and foreign countries (38 percent) occupy the biggest proportion, followed by economy/trade/business (8.4

percent), military/defence (6.6 percent), criminal/violence (6.3 percent), and entertainment/fashion (5.3 percent). Except for top leaders' diplomatic visits, other hit political topics in state accounts were the insulting of China by Dolce & Gabbana, and the terrorist attack against the Chinese Consulate in Karachi. As to private accounts, purely foreign military/defence news (11.4 percent) attracted the most attention, followed by China-related political stories (9.3 percent) and foreign entertainment/fashion news (8.7 percent).

Table 6: News Topics in WCOAs

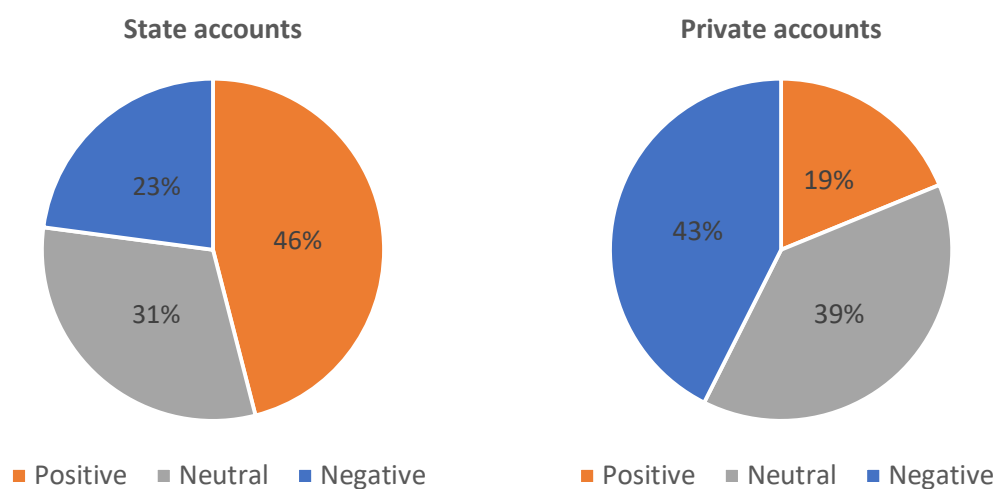
Type	Topic	State accounts	State accounts (%)	Private accounts	Private accounts (%)
Domestic stories intensively mentioning foreign countries	Technology	9	2.4	4	2.7
	Economy/Trade/Business	8	2.1	5	3.3
	Military/Defence	7	1.8	3	2.0
	Politics	5	1.3	1	0.7
	Society	2	0.5	2	1.3
	Culture	2	0.5	1	0.7
	Criminal/Violence	1	0.3	1	0.7
	Healthcare	1	0.3	0	0
	Education	1	0.3	0	0
	Entertainment/Fashion	0	0	6	4.0
	Disaster/Accident	0	0	1	0.7
	Environment	0	0	1	0.7
China-related international stories	Politics	144	38.0	14	9.3
	Economy/Trade/Business	32	8.4	12	8.0
	Military/Defence	25	6.6	11	7.3
	Criminal/Violence	24	6.3	2	1.3
	Entertainment/Fashion	20	5.3	9	6.0
	Education	10	2.6	2	1.4
	Society	7	1.8	6	4.0
	Sports	6	1.6	0	0
	Disaster/Accident	3	0.8	7	4.7
	Healthcare	2	0.5	3	2.0
	Culture	2	0.5	0	0
	Technology	0	0	1	0.7

Foreign stories	Politics	13	3.4	9	6.0
	Military/Defence	11	2.9	17	11.4
	Economy/Trade/Business	8	2.1	4	2.7
	Disaster/Accident	7	1.8	0	0
	Society	6	1.6	6	4.0
	Technology	6	1.6	0	0
	Healthcare	5	1.3	4	2.7
	Criminal/Violence	4	1.1	3	2.0
	Culture	3	0.8	2	1.3
	Education	3	0.8	0	0
	Entertainment/Fashion	2	0.5	13	8.7
Total		379		150	

Tones about Foreign Countries

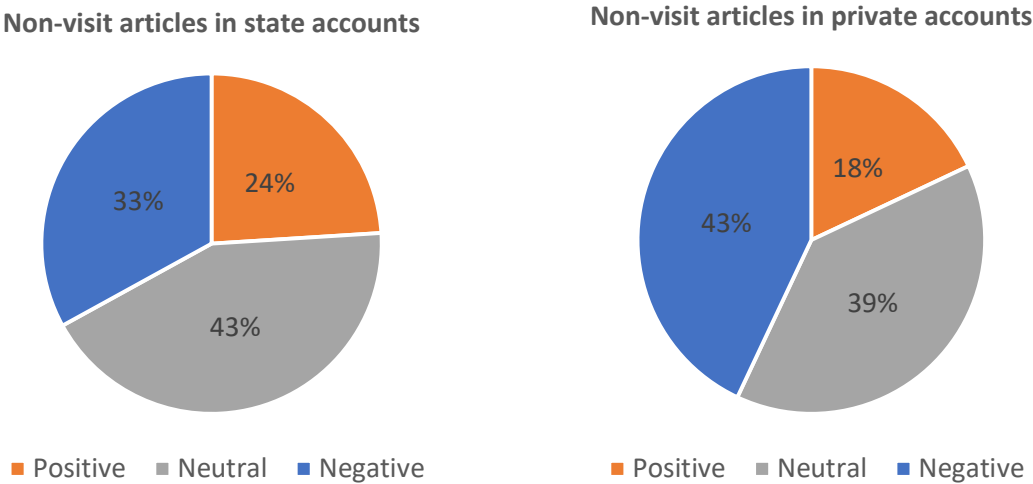
By coding the tone of sample articles, this study finds that, overall, private accounts hold more negative attitudes about foreign countries than state accounts do. Of 379 sample articles, state accounts intensively mentioned foreign countries 231 times. Among these, nearly half were positive mentions (46 percent), followed by neutral mentions (31 percent). Negative mentions accounted for only 23 percent. In private accounts, on the contrary, positive mentions (19 percent) are the least prominent, while negative mentions (43 percent) are the most prominent.

Chart 3: Tones Distribution in WCOAs



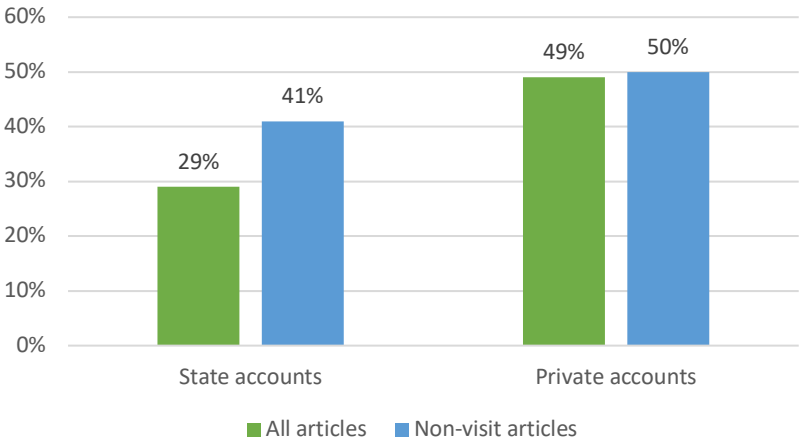
Previous studies have shown that diplomatic visits have an obvious influence on the portrayal of foreign countries in Chinese media. During leaders’ visits to foreign countries, positive coverage of certain countries usually dominates Chinese media. Hence this study further analysed articles that were not relevant to leaders’ diplomatic events. The result shows that private accounts are still more negative about foreign countries than state media. After excluding visit-related stories, the proportion of positive coverage of foreign countries shrinks considerably, to 24 percent, in state accounts. Consequently, neutral portraits become the most prominent; the share of negative coverage increases to 33 percent, but is still 10 points lower than the negative rate in private accounts.

Chart 4: Tone Distribution in Non-visit Articles in WCOAs



Analysis of the number of articles that negatively mention at least one foreign country provides supportive evidence. As shown in Chart 5, of 379 articles in state accounts, 109 articles intensively mentioned at least one foreign country in a negative way, accounting for 29 percent. In private accounts, nearly half of 150 sample articles (49 percent) involved negative portraits of at least one foreign country. If we exclude articles related to leaders’ visits, the negative rates in state accounts and private accounts are 41 percent and 50 percent respectively.

Chart 5: Negative Rate in Terms of Article Numbers



Not surprisingly, the five most positively portrayed countries in state accounts were all countries visited by Xi Jinping during the period analysed. Take Spain, for example. In the narrative of state accounts, Spain is a “beautiful and rich”³⁴ country full with “romance and passion”³⁵; the Sino-Spain relation is in “the best ever period in history”³⁶; with “deep friendship”³⁷, China and Spain will “work together to create new brilliant fruit.”³⁸ The positive rates of Papua New Guinea, Argentina, and Philippines are relatively lower than those of Spain and Brunei. But it is because some articles, for instance, a short news briefing, mention these countries in a neutral way. No negative portrait can be found in articles related to leaders’ diplomatic visits.

Since private accounts did not cover leaders’ diplomatic visits, they showed a big divergence in terms of the most positive countries. As shown in Table 7, Russia (35 percent), Japan (33 percent), and the UK (20 percent) are the three most positive countries in private accounts. However, it is worth noting that, overall, positive rates in private accounts are not high. So this only shows that these countries received relatively more positive portraits, rather than absolutely positive mentions. For instance,

³⁴
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³⁵
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³⁶
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³⁷
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³⁸
https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA4MjQxNjQzMA==&mid=2768398780&idx=1&sn=73b971bf833f541e1f3ff455195383cc&scene=0#wechat_redirect

private accounts mentioned Japan 27 times in total. Positive, neutral, and negative portraits were equally distributed, with nine each. In fact, no country received a positive rate, which was overwhelmingly higher than its neutral rate and negative rate, in private accounts.

As to the most negative countries, there are more overlaps between state accounts and private accounts. Ukraine, the US and India are listed among the five most negative countries by both state accounts and private accounts. All articles mentioning Ukraine focused on the Russia-Ukraine conflict in Kerch Strait. Both state accounts and private ones portrayed Ukraine as an “invader”³⁹ that “provoked”⁴⁰ Russia. Private accounts made it even ruder, describing Ukraine as a “foolish”⁴¹ “shit stirring stick.”⁴² Concerning the US, its global image in state accounts was “self-centred”⁴³, “full of hypocrisy”⁴⁴, and “getting used to acting like an overlord”⁴⁵; the American democracy was “ineffective”⁴⁶, American cities were “over expanded”⁴⁷, and the US administrative organs always “shifted the blame to others.”⁴⁸ The narrative about the US in private accounts were similar.

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Table 7: Five Most Positive Countries in WCOAs

State accounts		Private accounts	
Country	Positive rate	Country	Positive rate
Spain	100%	Russia	35%
Brunei	100%	Japan	33%
Papua New Guinea	94%	United Kingdom	20%
Argentina	94%	Italy	17%
Philippines	92%	Germany	14%

Table 8: Five Most Negative Countries in WCOAs

State accounts		Private accounts	
Country	Negative rate	Country	Negative rate
Italy	76%	Malaysia	88%
Ukraine	50%	Ukraine	83%
United States	44%	India	75%
South Korea	38%	United States	49%
India	32%	Germany	43%

Tone about China

Another important index for this study is the tone regarding China in sample articles. As discussed in the literature review, a typical propagandist frame of foreign coverage in the China media is to emphasize the negative aspects of foreign countries, and show an extraordinary China by creating a subtle comparison. Thus, this study particularly analysed whether and how WCOAs mentioned China in articles that contain negative narratives about foreign countries.

The result shows that state accounts tended to emphasize the hostility of foreign countries to China (37.6 percent), while private accounts made bigger efforts in promoting China’s achievements and superiority (43.2 percent). In state accounts, many articles accentuating hostility were about Sino-US relations. For instance, the US was widely reported on 23 November 2018 to have cancelled several Chinese scholars’ US visas. On the WCOAP, *Reference News* interpreted the event as “The US Finally Targeted Ordinary Chinese” in the title.⁴⁹ Foreign media, companies, and universities were often

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https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjM5MzA0MTg2MA==&mid=2653861576&idx=1&sn=45881454aad6f1cc9044b2e2870a9ab9&scene=0#wechat_redirect

criticised by state accounts for insulting China as well. Dolce & Gabbana, an Italian fashion brand, was heavily criticised for abusing China. Korea University was reported to have violated the “One China” policy by paralleling Tibet with India in a cultural exchange event. A news story of the *New York Times* about the crackdown on pet dogs in Hangzhou, a big city in East China, was criticised by *Global Times* for “demonizing the Chinese society and Communist Party of China.”⁵⁰

Table 9: Tone about China in Articles Containing Negative Narratives about Foreign Countries

Tone	State	State	Private	Private
	accounts	accounts (%)	accounts	accounts (%)
No mention	11	10.1	16	21.6
Neutral	20	18.3	14	18.9
Imperfect China	1	0.9	4	5.4
China being targeted	41	37.6	8	10.8
Amazing China	36	33.0	32	43.2
Total	109		74	

When covering the incident of Dolce & Gabbana, private accounts provided alternative perspectives. For example, *Huxiu.com*, an account run by a tech and business news website, pointed out that “unlike the situation several years ago, the Chinese market, which has become a strategic market for many luxury brands, has already mastered the power of international discourse.”⁵¹ When covering purely foreign stories that did not involve China, private accounts sometimes accentuated the advantage of China. For instance, *SoYoung*, an account operated by a medical aesthetics company, covered the illegal human skin trade in Nepal, which was originally uncovered by Soma Basu, a journalist fellow of the RISJ. After describing the miserable experience of Nepali victims, *SoYoung* ended the article with praise for China: “While feeling sympathy for them, let’s praise our peaceful and prosperous country where we live!”⁵²

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https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjM5MDk1NzQzMzQzMQ==&mid=2653273768&idx=1&sn=fc627e07ed14156ada420a19eafb523d&scene=0#wechat_redirect
⁵¹
https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MTQzMjE1NjQwMQ==&mid=2655552009&idx=1&sn=8876e338890a4d790ad0fdf925c8fee0&scene=0#wechat_redirect
⁵²
https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjM5OTIwNjQxNw==&mid=2660208645&idx=1&sn=9412e0d9c64cb21d48644b48004d2258&scene=0#wechat_redirect

It is also worth noting that, of 36 sample articles in state accounts framing an “amazing China”, 11 pieces were originally published by private accounts. Among the most prominent examples is a commentary about the wildfire in California, USA. *People’s Daily*, *Liaowang Institute*, and *Chutian Metropolis Post*, a state-owned and market-oriented newspaper in the inland province of Hubei, all republished an article about the wildfire, which was originally published by *Lang Yan Zhi*, a self-media. In this article, the author of the self-media maintained that he was not surprised by the tragedy in California because he knew the Western political system was defective. The author, who claimed to have lived in the West for many years, demonstrated his argument in four aspects. First, the American “disaster relief mechanism is not good enough” and the US “does not implement the responsibility system.” Second, the Western political system, “in essence, is a game and is easy to lead to low effective democracy.” Third, “egoism is stubborn and most people think about fleeing.” Fourth, “social efficiency is quite low and the mobilizing ability is as loose as a sheet of sand.” By contrast, the author recalled his memory about a wildfire in Fujian, a coastal province in Southeast China, where all male adults in the village voluntarily went to put out the fire. “You can only see such a heartwarming mobilization in China,” the author sighed. He also praised that “looking back at China’s perfect disaster relief mechanism, I really want to give the motherland a big ‘like’.”⁵³

Conclusion and Discussion

The quantitative analysis demonstrates that foreign news coverage is in the minority on the WCOAP, the top news consuming and sharing in Chinese mobile cyberspace. Private accounts pay even less attention to international stories in which China is involved, than state accounts do. Yet the proportion of purely foreign stories with no connection to China is higher in private accounts than that in state accounts (RQ1). In addition, there seem to be more niche private accounts that concentrate on foreign news. Political, military, and entertainment news are among the most popular topics in foreign-concentrated private accounts.

Partly due to the limitation on publishing frequency, private accounts cover fewer countries than state accounts. In addition, private accounts are more concentrated on a small number of countries, in particular, the US (RQ2). This suggests that foreign coverage in private accounts is still determined by the super power pattern and regionalism. However, while foreign coverage in state accounts is

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https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjM5MjAxNDM4MA==&mid=2666225534&idx=1&sn=f526f9a979fbbcb62d011a99cf962d92&scene=0#wechat_redirect

heavily driven by top leaders' diplomatic visits, private accounts show an obvious divergence in this determinant (RQ3).

As to the framing, private accounts have even more negative narratives about foreign countries than state accounts. The latter holds an overwhelmingly positive tone about foreign countries visited by Chinese top leaders. In most articles irrelevant to diplomatic visits, state accounts show a neutral attitude towards foreign countries. Most strikingly, there are more articles in private accounts which praise the achievements of China by criticizing foreign countries. This suggests that private accounts support propagandist framing rather than challenging it (RQ4).

Due to limited capabilities, this study coded sample articles in only two natural weeks. The conclusion would be more persuasive if the time span could be expanded to four constructive weeks. Another limitation of the study is that all coding was conducted by the author alone. Thus, the study can only provide preliminary conclusions. To come to a more persuasive conclusion, it would be necessary to employ another coder to cross check the reliability of the coding.

Nevertheless, I hope this research would still enrich the academic understanding of foreign coverage on Chinese social media. US scholars find that the more negative coverage a nation receives, the more likely readers are to think negatively about the nation; positive coverage of a nation has no influence on public perceptions.⁵⁴ It is impossible for this paper to fully look into how foreign stories on the WCOAP have influenced Chinese mobile Internet users' perception of foreign countries. Given the prevailing frames on the WCOAP, however, it may be reasonable to infer that the rise of mobile Internet has not enlarged Chinese netizens' views of the outside world, but intensified several stereotypes about foreign countries and about the interaction between China and the world. Internet patriotism, which has increased in recent years in China, may be one of the consequences.

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